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Kentucky Ag News Headlines

Woodlands Management is Heartwood of State's Wood Industry

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Nearly half of Kentucky's land is forested. The casual observer might classify those lands as unused acreage, but University of Kentucky foresters know that those "idle" lands are behind the employment of more than 30,000 Kentuckians, double the number employed in the state's coal industry.

Kentucky's forest industry adds approximately \$8.7 billion to the state's economy, according to the U.S. Forest Service. Of that, timber sales account for approximately \$180 million. In a state where 78 percent of the woodlands are privately owned by individuals and families, that money goes directly to the private woodland owner.

That income hinges on proper woodland management, said Billy Thomas, extension forester with the University of Kentucky College of Agriculture. However, sorting through all the available management options and trying to find professional assistance can be daunting for landowners.

Thomas recently wrapped up the final session of the 2008 Woodland Owners Short Course, a partnership effort between UK forestry extension and Kentucky forestry and natural resource organizations. The program was presented in east, west and central Kentucky and consisted of three on-site classes in each region. It was designed to introduce landowners to woodland management techniques, managing for wildlife and the state's wood industry. The latter session, a new addition this year, was an eye-opener to many of those taking the course, Thomas said.

"I think that the woodland owners really got a great deal out of that. It gave them an idea what happens to their trees once they leave their farm. It also gave them some insight on what the wood industry is looking for as far as a product, and the hope is, that will allow woodland owners to better manage their property today and as time goes on, as well as to market their property better," he said.

Through the assistance of the Kentucky Forest Industries Association, participants in this year's short course were introduced to a sampling of Kentucky's wood industries. Depending upon the region, attendees visited Harold White Lumber and Millworks in Morehead, B&K Wood Products and Sebree Fence Company in Madisonville, and Lebanon Oak Flooring and Ames True Temper, which manufactures tool handles, in Lebanon. Landowners saw first-hand what becomes of their trees.

"Generally, I think it was interesting for landowners to see what happens to trees of varying qualities. I think it opened their eyes that quality really does matter in some of these finished products," Thomas said. "Becoming familiar with the end product can help them when it comes to management and marketing."

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Harvesting timber is not the only way that woodland owners can derive income from their properties; non-timber forest products, hunting leases, and carbon credits also offer possibilities for income. For those who do want to derive some income from their land through timber harvesting, Thomas cautions that harvesting should not be the end-all-be-all for landowners.

"What we hope is that they will be managing their property well in advance of the harvest because a well-timed and well-planned harvest can do a great deal of good for a forest, and an ill-timed or ill-conducted harvest can have very bad impacts on that property -- not only today but as time goes forward," he said.

In many instances it is difficult for woodland owners to determine their property's potential until they have a forest inventory conducted. Once landowners determine their objectives for their property, Thomas recommends they work with a professional forester to develop a management plan. Then, if they do decide to sell their timber, getting a feel for what that timber is worth can pay off in the long run. That's where he thinks this year's short course really hit home with a lot of people.

"They saw that if you start out with a junky tree, from a timber perspective, one with a lot of knots and defects, you'll end up with junky wood which won't have much value," he said.

During a trip to the Ames True Temper factory, Christopher Will, a forester with Central Kentucky Forest Management, told landowners that maple can be undervalued because of its knots. However, he pointed out, those knots often are deep in the wood, allowing for a lot of clear cuts before hitting them. Information like that can help a landowner place a reasonable value on their property.

Not everyone who took this year's short course was interested in harvesting their woodlands. Carol and Michael Parker have a certified Tree Farm in Clark County. Despite the fact that the word "farm" might suggest a tangible harvestable product, Michael Parker said they are "growing trees so you can breathe." The Parkers' goal for their property is to provide good habitat for wildlife and for their own enjoyment. They have learned, however, that even this requires good management practices. They work regularly on their land, eradicating invasive species such as bush honeysuckle and grapevine, and consult with a forester to improve wildlife habitat and make sure their forest meets the standards set by the American Tree Farm System.

"The beautiful thing about forestry and woodland management is you can obtain a multitude of benefits through compatible practices," Thomas said. "It doesn't have to be this or that. It can be this and that. And that's where working with professionals, who know what they're doing and can give you sound advice, will ultimately make sure that your results are satisfying."

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